

Road to Resilience: A VISTA Guide to Assessing and Building Resilience

Support Trust Thrive Honesty Creative Meaning
Compassion Humour
Gratitude Self Care Optimism
Role Models Facing Fear Bouncing Back
Improvise Active Focused Elasticity Flexibility
Self Awareness Faith

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“There’s three things you can do when life sends a wave at you. You can run from it, but then it’s going to catch up and knock you down. You can also fall back on your ego and try to stand your ground, but then it’s still going to clobber you. Or you can use it as an opportunity to go deep, and transform yourself to match the circumstances. And that’s how you get through the wave.”

- HUMANS OF NEW YORK, OCTOBER 1ST, 2013

Introduction

What's the buzz about resilience? Why is it important?

Suddenly, “resilience” is a hot topic. It is the subject of serious books and news articles, lauded commencement addresses, and many conferences. But what does all of this talk of resilience mean? Has the human race advanced past denial, anger, and bargaining and skipped straight to acceptance? Not necessarily, but there is no doubt that resilience is an idea that holds a certain mystique and potentially transformative power. Resilience is all about **our capacity to survive and thrive in the face of disruptions of all kinds**. But there is often

a danger in defining resilience too narrowly that we deprive of its power to transform. It is more than just bouncing back from a disaster or protecting and maintaining the status quo. The need for resilience could kickstart significant changes in our built environment, our connection to the natural world, and our relationships with one another. But to seize that opportunity, we need to get real about what resilience is — and what it isn't. In this Action Learning Challenge project, we hope to do just that by laying out some truly transformative thinking on resilience.

What does it mean to be resilient?

Resilience is the end product of the intuitive application of positive psychology to the management of personal adversity. People who we would describe as “resilient” are those individuals who display “the capacity to remain well, recover, or even thrive in the face of adversity” (Hardy, Concato & Grill, 2004). Resilient people are those who do not choose and allow themselves to become victims; they do not give into and opt for suffering. When abused, challenged, or deprived, these are the individuals who rise up with practical solutions and joy. They are also the ordinary people dealing with the challenges and tragedy over every day real life (Masten, 2001). As such, for academics and the public alike, validated practical scales measuring resilience promise a better understanding of ways of identifying resilience and effective interventions for enabling and enhancing resilience.

**“These are
individuals who
rise up with
practical solutions
and joy”**



What factors make up resiliency?

Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, and stress. ***It means “bouncing back” from difficult experiences.*** People commonly demonstrate resilience, but this does not mean that they do not experience difficulty or distress. Resilience is not necessarily a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves the possession of and access to a set of personal characteristics (resources) and life circumstances (protective factors) that an individual can use when faced with adversity in order to emerge from the process functioning at the same level as they were prior to the difficulty. ***Strengthening resiliency involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone.***

In this work, we have defined resiliency within the following four categories:

Mental Resiliency

Resources of intelligence, easy temperament, flexible personality, optimism, positive self-view, good regulation of arousal and impulse, and a sense of humor have been identified as important traits.



Social Resiliency

Social entities and their abilities to tolerate, absorb, cope with and adjust to environmental and social threats of various kinds. The ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political and environmental change. The definition highlights social resilience in relation to the concept of ecological resilience which is a characteristic of ecosystems to maintain themselves in the face of disturbance.



Physical Resiliency

“Physical resilience refers to the body’s capacity to adapt to arising challenges, maintain stamina and strength in the face of demands, and recover efficiently and effectively when acutely damaged or microbially besieged.”
(essentialecology.com)



Emotional Resiliency

The ability to see oneself as separate from other’s problems. The ability to see through lies and mistreatment, as well as an early sense of independence enabling the seeking of alternative support. Emotional resilience exercises our capability to imagine, dream, plan, and create.



“Resilience, in short, is an active and dynamic interaction with adversity, which ebbs and flows in accordance with the immediate balance of resources, protective factors, and risks. It cannot occur in the absence of stressors, because in such an absence, only the potential to be resilient exists.”

(Tusaie & Dyer, 2004)

Assessment

This assessment was designed as a way to identify your strengths potential areas of improvement in order to set goals and apply strategies that will help you develop your personal resiliency and have a successful year of service. This assessment is intended to be taken multiple times throughout your service as a way to continually reflect upon your resiliency skills.

1

Strongly Disagree

2

Disagree

3

Neither Agree Nor Disagree

4

Agree

5

Strongly Agree

On a scale of 1-5, please rate your level of agreement with the following statements:

Mental Resiliency

1. I am good at solving complex problems. I use analytical logic, creativity, and common sense to find solutions.

2. I feel comfortable with my paradoxical complexity. I am trusting and cautious, unselfish and selfish, optimistic and pessimistic, etc.

3. When I fail, I learn from my mistakes and change my tactics when I try again.

4. I can remain focused and motivated on the task at hand.

5. I challenge myself beyond my abilities in order to grow.

Average score:

Social Resiliency

6. My opinion and perspective is heard and valued in my close personal relationships.

7. I have several people in my life who give me unconditional love and can listen to me without judgement.

8. I feel connected to the community I am a part of.

9. I have a mentor I can turn to when a crisis occurs in my life.

10. I feel comfortable being myself and feel accepted within my social circle.

Average score: _____

Physical Resiliency

1. When I de-stress I look to my talents to help me relax, including poetry, music, or sports.

2. I have enough energy throughout the day to complete my work and do something fun after.

3. I know how to let go of my anxiety over things I can't control.

4. I get enough sleep and wake up feeling refreshed and eager to work.

5. I keep moving even if I don't feel like it and make physical activity a priority.

Average score: _____

1. I am able to find the humor in difficult experiences and can laugh at myself.

2. I see obstacles as temporary and have confidence in my ability to overcome them

3. I have compassion and empathy for others and am aware of how my actions affect others.

4. I embrace my individuality and am proud of what makes me unique.

5. I have discovered a sense of meaning and purpose in my life.

Average score: _____

Once you have calculated and reviewed your average scores for each section, take some time to answer the following debrief questions:

- 1. Where are you in your cycle of service?**
- 2. Which section did you exhibit the strongest resiliency?
Where could you make the most improvement?**
- 3. Do any of these scores surprise you? Do they line up with how you feel?**
- 4. If this is not the first time you've taken this assessment, how were your scores different than the last time you took it?**
- 5. How much do you think your scores were affected by personal vs. professional factors?**
- 6. Are there challenges or issues that can be addressed, one-time problems vs. long-term concerns?**
- 7. Which of these areas would you like to work on this quarter?**
- 8. What are the barriers to growth in that area?**

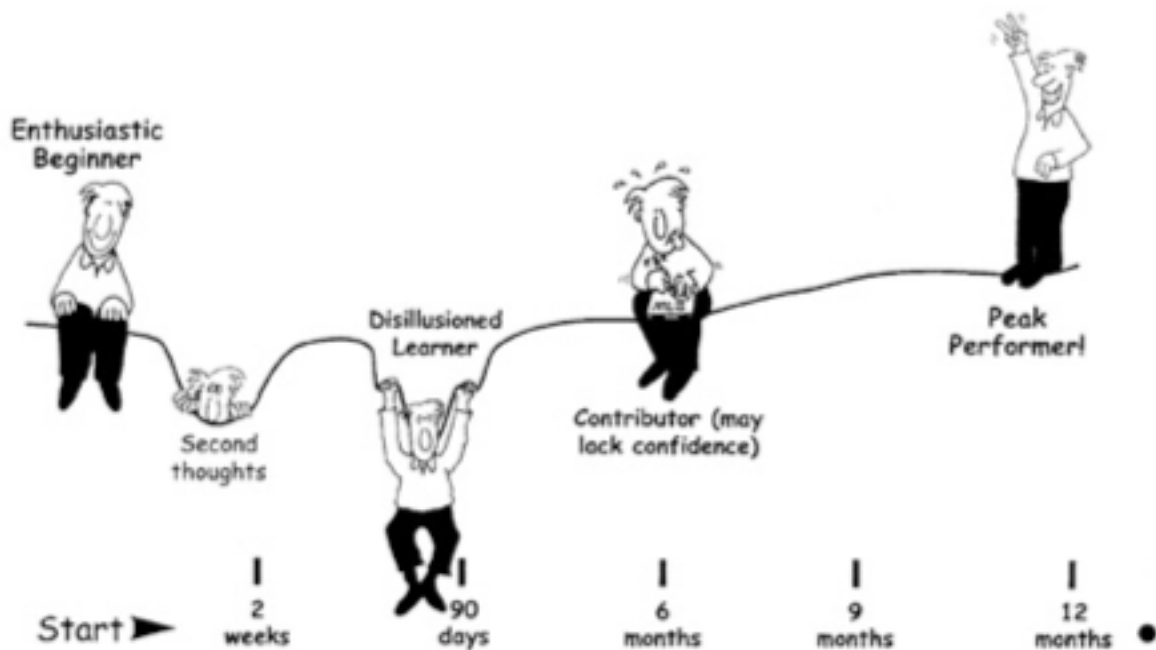
What does this have to do with VISTA service?

The rewards of being a VISTA are numerous and powerful. Whether we are helping individuals or promoting social change, our work provides us opportunities for intellectual stimulation, emotional gratification, and competency development. Though we experience all of these benefits, we also experience challenges manifesting in many forms that can create stress, disillusionment, frustration, compassion fatigue, and even burnout. Despite the best of intentions, it is all too easy to experience symptoms such as anxiety and restlessness which may dissipate on their own but take a toll on our overall health and well-being. The support of colleagues, family, and friends is a wonderful asset, but being able to learn how to calm and soothe ourselves and relax more effectively is also an effective skill.

Where are you in your service?

Months 1-2 Enthusiastic Beginner

At the beginning of your service, it is likely you are incredibly excited to begin and ready to tackle every challenge that arises. However, it is important that you set your expectations so as to not lose steam early on. Service is not a race, and community-wide transformation takes time and dedication. It is critical during this period to practice your **social resilience** to start building bonds within your community and learn about your host site.



Adapted from Ken Blanchard's Situational Leadership

Months 2-4 Second Thoughts

As you begin to settle down into the your routine, you may be overcome with the enormity of your project and begin to have second thoughts about what you have committed to. This is an important time to practice your **emotional resiliency** to remind yourself what you are doing and why. Practice re-framing challenges as opportunities to learn and grow.

Months 3-6 Disillusioned Learner

VISTAs become disillusioned when they feel as though they are not making meaningful contributions or are not getting enough support from their direct supervisors. This is a crucial time to practice your **mental resiliency** to stay focused and find creative solutions to problems. Mixing things up and finding new partners to collaborate with can be a welcome boost to productivity,

Months 2-12 Cautious Contributor

A cautiously contributing VISTA has the skills to succeed but lacks the confidence or vision to pull their plans forward. Projects can become stagnant and a VISTA may be facing burnout. It is absolutely vital to focus on your personal well-being and **physical resiliency**. Without taking the time to recover, you may not fully step back and appreciate all that you have accomplished throughout your year.

Months 6-12 Peak Performer

Within your final months of service, you will likely have fallen into a steady routine of successful habits and feel confident in your skills and progress. It is now the time to reflect on what you have learned and how you will carry these strategies forward into your personal and professional future.

Resiliency Building Activities

With increasing challenges presented by technological advancements and changing work environments, we are all under an increased level of pressure to deliver more for less. The demand for improved physical, mental, emotional, and social resilience is greater than ever, but the human race's ability to manage pressure appears to have declined. Uninterrupted stress over a long period of time has serious implications for our health, but most people are unaware of the many ways in which stress presents itself in their own lives.

We are all wired differently and have unique ways of coping with stress. Therefore, developing resilience is a personal journey. People do not all react the same to traumatic and stressful life events, and one person's approach to building resilience might not work for another person.

We have gathered suggestions of various activities through which you can strengthen and prioritize your resiliency.

Practicing Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the practice of paying close attention to what we are experiencing in the present, both inside our bodies and minds, and in the external world (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 1994, 2012; Nhat Hanh, 1975; Rosenberg, 1998; Santorelli, 1999). It is a conscious effort to be aware of whatever is going on right now, without judging or criticizing what we find. In each moment, mindfulness invites us to be awake, aware, and accepting of ourselves. It also allows us to slow down the hectic pace we keep, and to focus on our lives more fully.

The practice of mindfulness is integral to our efforts to reduce stress and to improve upon our capacity to cope (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Although mindfulness is best learned and reinforced through sustained practice, many mindfulness-based strategies can be incorporated into daily life activities (Boyce, 2012; Burdick, 2013; Fralich, 2013; Stahl & Goldstein, 2010). Practicing these techniques will not prevent stress or take it away when it occurs, but doing them with care and attention on a regular basis can help us manage more effectively. *The following pages include several to consider, adapted from Mindfulness: 10 Lessons in Self-Care for Social Workers by Deborah Lisansky Beck, MSW, LICSW.*



Mindful Moments

Self-care is not something to just focus on in your spare time. It is a disposition, attitude, and ongoing state of body and mind (Cox & Steiner, 2013). In practicing mindfulness, one should take time each day to shift from a mode of doing to one of pausing and reflecting on the “now”. As you sit, stand, or move, be aware of your feelings, thoughts, and body. Rather than taking time to “tune or veg out,” these are moments to “tune in” more closely to your experience. Taking time to be with yourself in this way on a regular basis is at the heart of what is known as mindfulness meditation, which is often practiced with the awareness of breath technique (Nhat Hanh, 1975).

Awareness of Breathing

Focus your attention on your breathing. Notice your breath as you inhale and as you exhale. Take time to observe your breath and just breathe without forcing it to change in any way. Place your hand on your belly and notice how it rises and falls. Put aside time each day to breathe in this way. When you find your mind wandering, which happens, just bring it back gently to your focus on the breath. By practicing in this way, the breath becomes an anchor that can help you maintain your focus on the present (Rosenberg, 1999).

Body Awareness

Notice whether your body is tense or relaxed. If any parts are tight or constricted, observe the tension and then see if you can soften it or gently let it go. Try tensing this part of your body even more for a second, and then release it. Become familiar with those parts of your body that are usually tense when you are stressed. Set aside time each day to sit or lie quietly and slowly scan your whole body, noting how you feel from head to toe. Don’t try to force the tension out or push it away. Bringing gentle awareness and acceptance to the way your body is, without resistance or struggle, can help to reduce the tension that you

Awareness of Thoughts

Take a moment to see where your thoughts are. Are they focused on what you are doing right now, or are they wandering someplace else? If they are far away—back in the past or ahead in the future—notice them and bring them back to what you are doing in the present. This exercise in mindfulness may help you concentrate more effectively. Apply the same curious observation to the content of your thinking itself. Watch your thoughts as they come and go, without holding on to some or pushing away others. Although certain thoughts may have previously caused you pain or anxiety, over time you may learn that your thoughts are just thoughts and nothing more. Instead of actively changing your thoughts, mindful attention may enable you to change your relationship to them. In this way, you may be able to loosen and free yourself from powerful, repetitive, or negative thought patterns and open the door to new ideas.

Single-focus Tasking

Multi-tasking may have become the norm in today's world, but it is probably a better practice for computers than it is for human beings. See what happens when you bring your attention fully to one experience or activity at a time. As you do with mindful breathing, come back to the task at hand if your mind wanders in different directions. You may actually accomplish more in this way than you would trying to complete several tasks at once, and you will make fewer mistakes to boot.

Social Support

The relationships you have with family, friends, and colleagues are a vital source of growth and comfort. On a practical level, they provide concrete assistance, valuable information, and companionship. On an emotional level, they foster a sense of belonging and shared commonality, and acknowledgment and validation for your uniqueness. In studies of resiliency and of recovery from illness, those individuals who survive and go on to succeed and thrive in life in the face of tremendous odds are people who have received significant social support along the way and have learned how to ask for and initiate it when needed (Fraser, 2003; Greene, 2012).

Herein lies the key and the connection to mindfulness. As volunteers, we are used to being caretakers for others, but many of us are reluctant to allow others to take care of us. Examine your willingness to be on the receiving end of social support, pay attention to your need for help when it occurs, and learn how to build interactions that foster support into your day.

Altruism

Find small ways to give to others. As VISTAs, we already do a lot of this in our day to day activities, but whether it's a warm smile to a stranger, attentive listening to a family member or friend, or planned volunteer activity for a social cause, mindfulness in the form of active compassion helps to transform the stress of both the giver and the receiver alike (Hafen, Karren, Frandsen, & Smith, 1996). Be creative, and find opportunities for mindful giving that are available and enriching to you. For a true change of pace, choose activities that are different from your placement, and stay clear of those that will only add a new layer of stress.

Attention to the Small Wonders of Life

Every day will be better if you take a moment to slow down, stop, and pay attention to something of wonder around you. The way the sun hits the trees, a cool breeze coming through the window on a hot day, the sound of laughter --each day is full of rich examples. Take a moment to find them in your world. When you do, pause to appreciate them, and let yourself become aware of whatever feelings surface within. If you take the time to let the small wonders of life into your daily routine, you may find yourself better able to deal with the stressors you face along the way.

Mindfulness at Work

Be sure to take breaks as needed to stretch, go to the bathroom, and hydrate. Stand up and move around every hour, and turn off all electronic devices for a while when you can. Take time to eat lunch, either with colleagues or on your own, and practice mindful eating when possible. Walk outside to get some air and see your surroundings, or walk around inside your building and greet others on your way. Whether you have a dedicated office space or not, take items to work that can help you engage in mindful moments.

Suggest to your supervisors that they incorporate “mindfulness at work” or “wellness,” as it is sometimes called, into the larger routine. Share your own strategies with colleagues, and take the lead in spreading mindfulness around.

Try this to assess wellness at work:
www.happinessatworksurvey.com

“The Happiness at Work Survey is based on a model of wellbeing developed for the UK Government Office of Science’s “Foresight Programme”. The model recognises that happiness and wellbeing are influenced by, and influence, multiple interconnecting factors. In a work context these factors include the organization system, the personal resources that employees bring to work as well as how well they are able to carry out their jobs and their experiences at work. It is through a better understanding of these interconnections that individuals and organizations can identify the changes that will create a happier and more productive workplace.”



Physical Resiliency



- Exercise self-care - build healthy habits around eating, exercise, and sleep.
- Plan breaks throughout your day to get up and walk around.

Try as a group!

- Participate in a group challenge to stay active and, motivate one another, and track progress.
- Volunteer as a group to help the community outside of the organization that you serve.
- Plan a hiking, camping, or other outdoor activity
- Have a group dinner to share healthy recipes.



Mental Resiliency



- Meditate - Think through the situation and generate a list of action items, thoughts, and concerns.
- Practice Gratitude - Write down three things you are grateful at the start and close of each day.

Try as a group!

- Organize quick mid-day brain teasers for your VISTA cohort to lessen stress and begin thinking in creative ways.
- Check-in with your VISTAs' supervisors as well as one-on-one with each VISTA to discuss necessary training and invest in their personal development.
- Hold sessions for VISTA's to brainstorm on projects and explore ways their projects intersect to take advantage of collaboration.

Mindfulness Activity

“Standing in a circle with chairs behind the knees, ask each person to close their eyes and stay silent. The task is to count to one minute and quietly sit down. The leader should time the minute. Note after how many seconds the first person sits and the last person, and also who was closest to the 60-second mark. When the last person has sat down, ask how easy/difficult it was to guess a minute? What did they notice during the time? What could they feel? What could they hear? Did other people's movements influence them?”

-Adapted from activities by ECO-UNESCO and The Sanctuary

Emotional Resiliency



- Be Honest - Know that you are facing challenges and be honest about how you are feeling during your project and your service year.
- Practice breaking down the pros and cons of an experience that you find daunting.
- Practice looking at failure as an opportunity to learn and problem-solve. Keep a good sense of humor and find joy and purpose in service

Try as a group!

- Have an open door policy with your VISTAs. It is important that your VISTA's feel comfortable being open and honest with you.
- Celebrate your VISTA's accomplishments. Highlight their work on facebook or your website. Remember to thank them for their service and maintain a positive attitude when mentoring.
- Have VISTA's write a letter to their future self for each quarter and set goals for what they want to accomplish



Social Resiliency



- Communicate - Talk about your thoughts and feelings and come to the table with an open mind.
- Network - Build your network with other VISTA's in your area and talk to them about what resilience tactics they use
- Join a club or volunteer with an organization outside of VISTA in your community.
- Attend community events and go to city council meetings to learn about what are the important issues in the community.

Try as a group!

- Start the beginning of the year of service by having each ViSTA take inventory of their strengths and weaknesses. Have a mid and end of the year check in to and see how they have grown and how resilience has played a role in their service.



Conclusion- Is Resilience Learned?

The debate on nature versus nurture seems to cover a wide number of psychological constructs including the concept of resilience. There are many theories about resilience. Some people believe it is based on external assets such as family. Others say it's either hardwired into us or not. Following this camp of thought, resilience was described by Wagnild & Young (1993) as a personality trait that moderates the negative impacts of stress and promotes adaptations. Researchers who study resilience as a trait focus on physical and psychological characteristics that allow individuals to rise above adversity. In a study of long term outcome of attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) Hetchman (1991) found resilient trait in his subjects which included adaptability, social responsiveness, above average intelligence, positive self-esteem, and autonomy. Rabkin, Remien, Katoff, and Williams (1993) in their study of long term AIDS survivors found that these people have extraordinary resources such as intelligence, adaptability, and optimism. In yet another study on how elderly women cope with major life losses, Wagnild and Young (1990) found that these women have certain resilience characteristics such as perserverance, self-reliance, strong sense of self and meaningfulness amongst other characteristics.

But what could explain the ability of these individuals experiencing illness and loss to be resilient? Researchers believe that levels of several brain chemicals and other hormones vary among individuals, the two main players being cortisol (a stress hormone) and oxytocin (causes calm). For example, a scared child will instinctively run to his mother for protection, and if she displays the appropriate love and affection, he will calm down almost immediately. Explaining this situation from a biological level, Cortisol pumps through the child's blood, raising his heart rate and blood pressure, thus causing normal stress behavior. Moreover, though somewhat of a mystery, love and affection affects the child's neurochemistry. As the child grows up and is away from his parent, he can recall the support, comfort, and encouragement he received from his parent, and thereby pull himself together to face life's challenges once again, thereby becoming more resilient. Like all genetic differences, it makes sense to acknowledge that levels of oxytocin are, in part, inherited. Thus, we are genetically hardwired to have neurochemical assets or deficits that influence resiliency, and perhaps there is hope that we can develop scientific treatment to balance the levels of these hormones in individuals.

On the other side of this debate, however, is the important point that resilient people are not invincible but seem to develop resilience by their ability to recover from events that stretched them. They do not allow such events to break them, which seems to suggest that resilience can be learnt and nurtured, activated and tuned up when required. One of the researchers in this school of thought, Rutter (1985) proposed that resilience and vulnerability are at opposite ends of a continuum. Where an individual falls along this continuum depends on the interplay of protective factors

and interactive processes. The role of protective factors is to modify one's response to adversity. These factors could include qualities of the individual such as gender, age, and experiences (though not necessarily positive ones). Interactive processes refer to the cumulative interaction of a variety of variables which are present when an individual faces stressful situations. According to Rutter (1985), learning from interactive processes occurs over time, not just based on any one stressful incident. He concluded that the development of individual resilience does not lie in avoiding stressful circumstances but in facing them at a time and in a manner that enhances self-confidence and competency.

Fine (1991) found that personal perceptions and responses to stressful life situations are crucial elements of survival and recovery, often transcending the reality of the situations. According to Fine (1991), there are two phases to the learning process of resilience – acute and reorganization phase. In the acute stage, energy is directed at minimizing the impact of the stressor and the stress. In the reorganization stage, a new reality is faced and accepted partially or in totality. Fine (1991) proposed that it is important for the individual to have social support and hope, find meaning in their lives, be able to attempt novel strategies to solve problems, transform disturbances into adaptive behavior and to recognize that there is more to oneself than what the current situation suggests.

Perhaps, however, resilience is a little of both. Maybe we are born with the ability to be resilient and develop it, just like a muscle, bending but not breaking through life's experiences.

Additional Resources

Resiliency Assessments Modeled from:

http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/cardev/gr12_found/blms/1-3.pdf

<http://www.courageproject.com/documents/ResiliencyQuiz.pdf>

<http://www.workingresources.com/changeresiliency/change-resiliency-quiz.html>

<https://www.depts.ttu.edu/hs/bmi/docs/resiliencyquiz.pdf>

Other Resources from Academic Research:

<http://resilienceresearch.org/research/projects/pathways-to-resilience>

https://victimsofcrime.org/docs/PDFs/GetHelp_Resilience_8700.pdf?sfvrsn=0

<http://www.ccl.org/leadership/pdf/community/ResiliencyPresentation.pdf>

<https://hbr.org/2002/05/how-resilience-works>

<http://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/3067.html>

<http://www.resiliencyforlife.com/documents/How%20Resilience%20Works%20Harvard%20.pdf>

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